

ON THE RIGHT:

We Were Bilked By Viet Cong Men

By WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.

REVERT to South Viet Nam, a preoccupation which will be forgiven me at least by those of my readers who are greatly concerned for Southeast Asia. The headline news is that we are doing very poorly in South Viet Nam. In the two months since the coup that overthrew the Diem government, the Viet Cong Communist guerillas have made more progress than during the preceding three years.

Even so, that may not prove the biggest piece of news. The biggest piece of news may be a speech by Sen. Thomas J. Dodd and the reaction to it by a number of Democratic and Republican Senators. It is understood that among them are Senators Hickenlooper and Humphrey. Sen. Dodd righteously infuriated by recent disclosures, has called for a Congressional investigation of our disastrous policy towards the Diem regime. What moved Sen. Dodd was, first, a devastating expose of our South Viet Nam policy by the Angel of Saigon, my respected colleague Miss Marguerite Higgins; and second, the material compiled by the United Nations Commission that went to South Viet Nam shortly before the military coup to investigate alleged atrocities against the Buddhists.

Miss Higgins has published a most remarkable article in the magazine America, the burden of which was that she had established, after extensive investigations in South Viet Nam before and after the coup, that the anti-Buddhist charges were wholesale fabrications, concocted by our enemies, diffused through a largely innocent Buddhist minority, and turned over to the echo chambers of Liberal neuroticism.

The aim of the originators of the charges was to undermine our anti-Communist strategy in South Viet Nam. Not everyone was taken in. Miss Higgins reports that Secretary McNamara and Mr. McCone of our CIA were deadset against jettisoning Diem, but that the counter-arguments of Ambassador Lodge and of the State Department's Roger Hilsman prevailed.

Secondly, Sen. Dodd was influenced by the famous United Nations investigation which was never concluded on the fishy grounds that it could no longer, now that Diem was dead, be relevant. The volume of testimony tended to show that even the UN's investigators, who had descended on Viet Nam convinced that the Buddhists were being sorely persecuted, were impressed by the evidence they came across suggesting Diem's innocence.



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I WROTE A WEEK AGO a column describing the report, which I labeled as secret. I am informed that I was technically incorrect and I apologize for the misinformation I passed along in good faith, having heard the report described as exactly that—secret—by the UN official who put it in my hands. Actually, on Dec. 7, copies were released to newspapermen but, for whatever reason, were not widely publicized.

The story, as it emerges, is something like this. The White House was snowed, last Spring and early Summer, by news of the alleged persecutions. The question arose whether Diem had, under the circumstances, become an unviable ally. When Diem raided the pagodas on Aug. 21, the White House apparently swallowed whole the representations of the spokesman of the Buddhists that here was final evidence of the bigotry of the Diem government. "After the closing of the pagodas," said the State Department's Mr. Hilsman to Miss Higgins, "the facts became irrelevant."

By which he meant that from that moment forward, the White House conspired, through Ambassador Lodge, to bring on the coup. It apparently did not occur to the White House that the raid on the pagodas had nothing to do with religion. The facts, as collected by the United Nations Commission, and by the Angel Higgins, suggest otherwise: that Diem was merely raiding the propaganda centers of pro-Communist and pro-neutralist agitation, as even democratic we might do, if we were fighting a civil war with the Communists.

Our problem is less in Saigon than in Washington. Our problem here is to force ourselves to look evidence square in the face, to analyze ourselves, and the reasons for our abject submission to world opinion pressure, and the reasons for our helplessness at the hands of a few Buddhist confidence men.